

Editor's note: This is the first offering of what we hope will become a regular feature in North Dakota OUTDOORS – a column that offers insight into current issues or events that affect the state's natural resources or associated outdoor recreation.

This first effort takes a look at fishing tournaments. In the future, we'll address topics such as baiting deer for hunting purposes, public land grazing management, guiding and outfitting, canned hunts on game farms, what makes a quality hunting or fishing experience, party hunting for deer, and many others.

These are issues the Game and Fish Department deals with on a regular basis. The agency receives sincere, passionate input "From Both Sides," and OUTDOORS presents those points of view and opinions as a way to give readers a broad perspective.

Fishing Tournaments

Ever since the first two anglers agreed to a wager on who would catch the first, biggest and most fish, people have engaged in friendly, and sometimes not-so-friendly, competition to determine who is the best – or luckiest – fisherman.

It's a concept that today covers personal bets in a boat to high-profile national events with televised finals and six-figure payouts. It's also a concept that receives considerable attention in North Dakota, and perhaps moreso in the last year because of a couple of unrelated events that prompted the Game and Fish Department to set up some new policies regarding tournaments.

In 1984, North Dakota's legislature mandated that Game and Fish regulate fishing tournaments. The agency issues permits for almost all tournaments in the state, from small ice-fishing derbies to the Governor's Cup walleye championship on Lake Sakakawea. In 2002 the agency issued 99 permits, 20 of which took place on Sakakawea. Devils Lake hosted 17 tournaments, while the state's other mid-sized reservoirs combined for 20 events.

One of the tournaments at Devils Lake last summer generated considerable feedback because of an unusually large number of walleye that, after release back into the water after tournament weigh-in, died and washed up on shore. While this wasn't the only such incident, it was the catalyst for a new policy that applies to all waters in the state, prohibiting most "live-release" tournaments during July and August when water temperatures are such that survival of released fish could be low. The Department will still allow tournaments during this time; tournament organizers simply have to adapt their rules so anglers would keep and use the fish they catch.

With low water levels in lakes Sakakawea and Oahe, North Dakota's Missouri River reservoirs, the Game and Fish Department is concerned about the low number of usable boat ramps, and how fishing tournaments based from those ramps might inhibit other public uses. While the Department hasn't cancelled



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any tournament permits for these two lakes, it developed a policy in case it becomes necessary.

Some tournament organizers have, on their own, postponed events for this year because of access issues.

Grab several anglers from the aisles of a fishing tackle store and ask them what they think about fishing tournaments, and they'll likely give several different answers. The variety of opinions is obvious from statistics gathered in a 1997 creel survey on the Missouri River System. Seventy-seven percent of anglers surveyed approved of fishing tournaments, 11 percent didn't approve, and 12 percent had no opinion.

The Game and Fish Department's policy is that the resource – fish populations and public use of public waters – is paramount. Economic and social benefits are incidental considerations compared to whether a tournament might negatively affect a fishery.

Here's a look at fishing tournaments ... From Both Sides.

One Side

- Tournaments generate a public interest in fishing that does not exist with other efforts such as "Take a Kid Fishing" events, etc. Consider the 8,000 or so people who have turned out for the final weigh-in of the Professional Walleye Trail held in Bismarck six of the past 10 years. Presumably this results in more people interested in fishing, more involvement in fishing, and more recreational hours.
- Tournament anglers, because of the competition involved, must improve or develop techniques that eventually help others catch more fish – things like planer boards, deep-running crankbaits, lead line, targeting suspended fish, etc.



Tournament anglers prepare to launch from Sugarloaf boat ramp south of Bismarck during the 1997 In-Fisherman Professional Walleye Trail Championship on the Missouri River. Some people feel such events unduly tie up public boat ramps; others suggest the congestion is only for short periods, and economic benefits of tournaments outweigh short-term inconveniences for other anglers.

The Other Side

- Successful tournament anglers, through seminars, magazine articles and personal contacts, can help casual anglers become more successful, which in turn can increase participation.
- Good tournament anglers will recognize the science in fish management and can use their celebrity status to help convey that knowledge to other anglers. (This could also be a negative if the angler doesn't really try to understand fish management, and thinks stocking or regulations can fix everything.)
- Fishing tournament anglers are licensed just like anyone else to fish on public waters and take a legal daily limit of fish.
- Fishing tournaments create specific opportunities for friends and families to get together and just fish for several days – the gathering is more important than the tournament, but without the tournament, the get-together wouldn't occur.
- Tournaments can provide an economic boost to the communities where they are headquartered.
- Professional tournament anglers generate considerable interest in new fishing equipment. Since most equipment used for fishing includes a federal excise tax that is collected and distributed back to states for fisheries management and development, tournaments indirectly help provide more money for state fisheries agencies.
- Fishing tournaments, from ice-fishing derbies sponsored by local wildlife clubs to professional events with thousands of dollars of prize money on the line, generate money for local fisheries projects.
- Tournaments can promote or highlight certain fisheries, which give other anglers incentive to travel and fish there.

- Making a contest of a traditionally passive leisure activity has adverse philosophical considerations. Fishing is not a contest; it is a pastime. Making it a contest erodes its inherent value, and diminishes the virtues it teaches.
- Fishing tournaments emphasize dollar return over enjoyment. North Dakota's natural resource use should not be based on revenue generated, but rather the enjoyment and recreational opportunities provided.
- A small percentage of anglers take a disproportionate number of fish. Many fish caught in pre-fishing or the actual tournament are released, but how many actually survive long-term remains a topic for debate.
- Tournaments create the perception that anglers need technology in order to catch fish, when that is usually not the case. Some people may quit fishing if they don't want to invest in the equipment they are led to believe is necessary for success.
- On tournament days, the main event ramp is basically overtaken by tournament participants, making it almost unusable by the public at certain times. The Game and Fish Department does require that non-tournament anglers have first right of entrance and exit on tournament days. If this is not applied, it is grounds for denial of the permit in future years.
- Tournaments commercialize a public resource.
- When big money is on the line, tournament anglers sometimes feel they have the right to fish any area, that they have more right to fish a spot on a public lake than someone who is not affiliated with the tournament.
- The competitive nature of tournaments, and associated time constraints, brings out rude and unethical behavior by some tournament anglers. Sportsmanship sometimes takes a back seat to the competitive nature of the game.
- Competition puts a premium on large fish, rather than fishing enjoyment.
- Keeping big fish is sometimes also contrary to fish management philosophy.
- Tournaments that attract nonresident anglers increase the potential that new aquatic nuisance species such as Eurasian water milfoil, zebra mussels and exotic fish from other states will be accidentally transported on boats or trailers and introduced into North Dakota waters. Such events require additional Game and Fish staff time to inspect and make sure boats are clean prior to entering the water.

That's just some of the input the Game and Fish Department considers when evaluating fishing tournaments, in addition to how these events might influence fish populations. Both sides have strong opinions. What do you think?